DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 460 676 IR 019 124

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TITLE The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Learner? Perspectives on the Creation of Community within Syracuse University's Master of Library Science-Independent Study Degree Program.

PUB DATE 1998-10-00

NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the EDUCOM '98 Conference (Orlando, FL, October 13-16, 1998).

PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Administrator Attitudes; *Community; Computer Mediated Communication; *Distance Education; *Graduate Students; *Group Dynamics; Group Experience; Group Unity; Higher Education; Independent Study; Interviews; *Library Education; Library Science; Listservs; *Masters Programs; Student Attitudes; Student Surveys

IDENTIFIERS *Syracuse University NY

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a case study focusing on community among students in a distance learning program, the Syracuse University (New York) Master of Library Science-Independent Study Degree Program (MLS-ISDP). During July 1998, the researcher conducted interviews with Syracuse University faculty and staff involved in developing and administering the program. MLS-ISDP participants were contacted via the MLS-ISDP listserv, which includes current students and alumni; 15 students from 1993-1998 cohorts participated. Results indicated that MLS-ISDP students felt a strong sense of community, although their cohorts were distributed across as many as 21 states and countries. Topics discussed include a program description and key terms; MLS-ISDP demographics; factors which foster and sustain community, such as "boot camp" (i.e., the initial 7-day residency), other required on-campus residencies, introductions and biographies, list of residence necessities, cohort directories, cohort photos, assigned "buddies" from previous cohorts, listservs, required class participation, group projects, and a suggestion for introducing new and returning students to each other; administrators' perspectives on the beginning of the program and changes over time, residencies, group identity and rivalry, and listservs; and students' perspectives on residencies, group identity, and rivalry. (DLS)

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ED 460 676

The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Learner?

Perspectives on the creation of community within Syracuse University's Master of Library Science - Independent Study Degree Program

This case study focuses on community among students in a distance learning program. It is common to think that distance learners are isolated from their fellow students. Verduin and Clark (1991) write, "Distance education offers students an opportunity to study and learn in a peer-free environment, when and if they prefer it" (p. 27). Although some distance learners no doubt prefer to learn as independently as possible, others desire community with their peers.

Further, there is evidence that communication and interaction among distance students is crucial to the learning experience. Carlson (1997) wrote that "in order for the online delivery method to be effective, the students must feel involved in the course, with the other students, and with the professor in order to succeed"(p. 3).

Internet-based communications allow student interaction and dialogue in a variety of ways: one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many, within an online classroom, outside of the classroom, formally, casually, professionally, and personally. Online interactions can be an important and versatile factor in the creation and encouragement of a community of distance learners.

This presentation describes a situation in which distance students feel a strong sense of community. Although these students earn the Master of Library Science in what is termed an "Independent Study Degree Program," their descriptions of their academic and social experiences in the program show that interdependence is important to them. The MLS-ISDP community is formed during the students' first in-person encounter in the program, is sustained by online contact, and even persists after graduation.

- About the project ..... p. 2
- Description of MLS-ISDP and key terms ..... p. 3
- MLS-ISDP demographics ..... p. 4
- Fostering community ..... p. 5
- Administrators' perspectives ..... p. 7
- Students' perspectives ..... p. 9
- Selected bibliography ..... p. 12

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EDUCOM '98
Poster Session - Track 2
"Connecting Electronic Communities"
October 13-16, 1998
Orlando, FL

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About the project

During July 1998, I conducted in-person interviews with Dr. Ruth Small, Associate Professor in Syracuse University's School of Information Studies, and Barbara Settel, Associate Dean of the School of Information Studies. Small and Settel established the Master of Library Science - Independent Study Degree Program (**MLS-ISDP**) in 1993 and administered it until 1996. I also conducted an e-mail interview with Amy Merrill, Director of Distance Education for the School of Information Studies, Syracuse University, who has administered MLS-ISDP and the School's other Independent Study Degree Programs since 1996.

In July 1998, I sent a note to the MLS-ISDP listserv calling for participation in this study. The listserv theoretically includes all MLS-ISDP students, including alumni. In reality, listserv membership is weighted toward current students, as some alumni drop off the listserv. Student interviews were conducted via e-mail from August to early October 1998.

Participants by cohort:

1993	1
1994	4
1995	1
1996	4
1997	1
1998	4

The initial response to my call for participation was highest among the cohorts of 1996 and 1998. (Some people who responded to the initial call for participation did not respond to the follow-up interview e-mail.) The former case may be an example of the sense of community within individual cohorts. I began in 1996, and thus all the member of MLS-ISDP 96 know me. Their enthusiastic response, on the listserv and in person, may be evidence of classmates' willingness to help one of "their own." I received several responses from the 1998 cohort before they had even begun the program, which I believe indicates that the concept of community is interesting and important to them. One incoming student wrote about her anxiety, "...the issue of community, or lack thereof, is one of my biggest concerns in this program. I don't think I'd consider a program like this if it wasn't the only practical way to complete the program....I am just envisioning a situation in which we are all our own isolated selves...."

Certain themes emerged from the interviews: the strong sense of group identity formed during "boot camp"; the importance of face-to-face contact in the residencies; the ability to sustain community with online interactions; the helpful and nurturing character of the community members. Although the evidence from this limited study shows a strong sense of community among students (a perception with which program administrators agree), it is not necessarily the whole picture. It is likely that students who agreed to participate are generally positive about the existence of community in MLS-ISDP. Those who do not feel part of a community may not be on the listserv or may not be inclined to participate in such a project. Further research could be done to identify those students who do not feel a sense of community in this program, to discover why not (and whether it even matters to them), and what can be done to involve such students more deeply in the community.

Description of MLS-ISDP and key terms

When establishing the Master of Library Science - Independent Study Degree Program, Dr. Ruth Small and Barbara Settel adopted Syracuse University's model for distance learning — a **"limited residency"** program combining brief, intensive on-campus work with at-home study. The at-home portion of the MLS courses involves a great deal of time spent on the Internet, retrieving and posting assignments, participating in class discussion, and conducting research.

All students must begin the program with **"boot camp,"** the student nickname for the introductory residency, held each July . During the residency, students take IST 511, "Introduction to the Library and Information Profession," an intense, seven-day course. Together, the incoming students form a **cohort**, which is identified by the year it began (ISDP93, ISDP94, and so on). Unlike the earlier cohorts, ISDP98 is divided into two cohorts, labeled A and B. The 1998 cohorts took IST 511 together, but will take core courses at different times.

After boot camp, students take four **core courses**, offered in the fall and spring semesters. Students take electives and core courses at their own pace. Because students progress through the program at different speeds, they end up taking classes with students from other cohorts.

All core courses and many electives require a brief, on-campus **residency.** Students generally stay in accommodations on campus (although it is not required). Each residency involves day-long class sessions, usually combining lectures, small group work, and student presentations. Some fall and spring courses require preparation work before the residency; all require more work to be done at home during the remainder of the semester. The majority of electives are offered during **Summer Institute**, a three-week on-campus program of short courses, usually ranging from two to seven days in length.

Some courses can be completed without visiting campus. Students may choose from an increasing number of Internet-only electives, may take up to six credits elsewhere for transfer, and are required to complete three or six credits of internship or readings and research.

For most of the time in the program, interaction within the student community takes place online, through e-mail, listservs, and **WebCT** (web-based courseware, which brings all course materials and communications together in a single "web space"). However, students and administrators said that the experience of *being in the same place at the same time* for the residencies created a strong sense of community and allowed that community to persist online. Although the residencies take up only a small percentage of the time spent in the whole program, students described the residencies with the most intensity.

"Independent study" is something of a misnomer for this program. Students are not completely independent of restrictions on time and place, because of the required residencies. Students do not design their own courses or curriculum, nor is their work completely self-paced (most courses have several deadlines for various assignments, including Internet participation in the class). And although students can usually be independent of one another if they choose (unless group projects are assigned), many say that student interdependence is an important aspect of the program, enhancing the learning experience.

MLS-ISDP demographics

Cohort	Number admitted	Women	Men	Number of different states and countries represented	Mean age at beginning of program	Age range
1993	28	18 (64%)	10 (36%)	10	40.9	28-55
1994	25	20 (80%)	5 (20%)	11	40.8	30-51
1995	37	28 (76%)	9 (24%)	14	39.9	23-53
1996	42	35 (83%)	7 (17%)	18	39.8	25-58
1997	42	36 (86%)	6 (14%)	17	38.6	25-51
1998	62	51 (82%)	11 (18%)	21	39.5	24-56

Data supplied by Amy Merrill, Director of Distance Education, School of Information Studies, Syracuse University.

Like-minded people

In describing the phenomenon of community within MLS-ISDP, Merrill said that demographics are a key factor: "It seems to me that the biggest reason for a sense of community among the ISDP students is that many are in similar life situations. We have many mothers who have worked in libraries part-time or on a volunteer basis and who are thinking about getting back to their careers. I always overhear them trading stories about their children, their libraries, etc. Also, almost every new ISDP student thinks they are the only one who is over 25 and hasn't been to school in several years, so I think they are very relieved to meet others just like them and they 'latch on.'"

Several students also commented on meeting others "just like them," although they focused on professional and educational similarities. As 1996 student Suellen Carman put it, "We share common interests, careers, goals, and even frustrations. We also share a common experience...of doing something new and ahead of the curve." Others commented favorably on the diversity within the cohorts: "I've studied with young parents, seniors, the disabled, and people like me who need to keep their jobs, and simply can't afford to sit in class an hour or two of every day. The people I've met in the program are determined adults who want to be enriched and want to enrich others, and that's made for memorable learning experiences for me" (Ann Wright, 1994).

Community-minded people

Small commented that the library profession attracts "nurturing, helping students," which may partly account for the strong communities formed in MLS-ISDP. Because students are "dependent upon each other" (for emotional support, professional support, or technical support), community is fostered by students' willingness to help one another. 1996 student Ann Gray wrote, "I feel that we were all in the same boat and that everyone tried very hard to help anyone who was having technical problems."

Merrill contrasted the MLS-ISDP students with students in the Master of Science in Information Resource Management (another ISDP within the School of Information Studies): "The IRM students don't seem to want to build a community in the way MLS students do. It's almost as if they can't be bothered. It might have something to do with the fact that there are more men in the IRM program than there are in the MLS." Settel commented that the attitude of IRM students toward residencies was "What am I going to get out of three days here?" -- a distinctly more business-like attitude than that expressed by many MLS students.

Further study would clarify the personal characteristics which give rise to such interdependence and support in the MLS-ISDP and to determine the importance of demographics. Data on race, ethnicity, income level, and education level would help describe the MLS-ISDP cohorts in terms of homogeneity or heterogeneity, as would more direct questions to students about their perceptions of similarity or difference among their cohorts.

Fostering community

This list is a compilation of administrator and student perspectives on factors which foster and sustain community in MLS-ISDP. Some of the practices and structures described here were initiated by administrators, some by faculty, some by students themselves.

Students and administrators agreed that the on-campus residencies are crucial to forming and sustaining community. Many distance learning programs do not have a residency component; indeed, for many distance students, a residency may be neither practical nor desired. However, many of the community-building practices described here could be adopted in distance learning programs with or without a residency component.

"Boot camp"

During the initial, seven-day residency, all students are enrolled in IST 511, "Introduction to the Library and Information Profession." Many noted that strong personal and cohort bonds were formed under the pressure of this intense, demanding course. "Boot camp" is held a week before Summer Institute begins. Thus, only the incoming MLS-ISDP students are on campus during "boot camp" week, which facilitates the cohesion of that new cohort.

Required on-campus residencies

Besides boot camp, residencies are also required for the four core courses (fall and spring semesters) and some electives (usually in the summer). A 1997 student wrote, "The residencies....are almost like family reunions and help to reinforce comfort and trust levels with fellow students and faculty."

Introductions and biographies

These take place in almost every course, in one or more ways:

- Students introduce themselves on the course listserv
- A course instructor conducts introductions in the first class session of the residency
- Students post a personal page within WebCT

Students quickly become familiar with each other's work situations, family lives, talents, skills and hobbies — the basis for personal friendships and professional networking.

List of residency necessities

For each incoming cohort, a list of "items to bring" to the Syracuse campus is compiled by a previous year's cohort. The list includes suggestions like: radio, extra towels, bottle of wine, family photos, teddy bear, light reading, earplugs. Incoming students find the list both useful and friendly.

Cohort directory

Includes each student's photo, contact information, and a brief personal description.

Cohort photo

At a picnic or other social event during "boot camp," a group photo is taken and later mailed to all cohort members.

Buddies

Incoming students are matched with a "buddy," a student from a previous year who contacts the new student via phone or e-mail. Amy Merrill, Director of Distance Education in the School of Information Studies, wrote, "A lot of the time I don't think students believe me when I tell them what the program is going to be like, so it helps if they get the picture from someone who has actually been through it."

Listservs

Each student is likely to belong to three or more listservs during a semester or summer:

- Listserv for the entire program (ISDP-MLS): often used by faculty and administrators to make announcements; occasionally used by students for issues which affect everyone.
- Listserv for each cohort (ISDP96, ISDP97, etc.): primarily social; often used for personal news to the group (for example, announcing a new job), complaints about the program, and calls for help (with technical problems, with questions about administrative aspects of the program). Instructors and administrators may or may not participate on the cohort listservs, which are managed by students. In at least one instance, the students voted to keep administrators off the listserv, preferring to have a private space for discussion.
- Listserv for each course (increasingly managed within WebCT): focuses on course material; often used for calls for technical help with course-specific materials.

Required class participation

Many instructors require students to participate in discussion on the class listserv or in WebCT and count such participation toward the final grade.

Group projects

Many courses require group projects, which are conducted via e-mail or chat rooms, or which require group work and a presentation during the residency.

A suggestion for the future

Sarah McHugh, a 1998 student, observed that after boot camp, those new students who remain at Summer Institute to take electives are a little startled to meet so many other students who are not in their cohort. She suggested that the School of Information Studies plan "some sort of event where people from other classes could sort of mingle and get to know one another." In fact, the School of Information Studies does sponsor continental breakfast and buffet lunches on the weekends of Summer Institute, but not for the express purpose of introducing new and returning students to one another. An event in which returning students were encouraged to meet and greet new students — an in-person, group-wide extension of the "buddy system" — might promote inter-cohort communication, alleviate the new students' anxiety, and reduce group rivalry.

Administrators' perspectives

Based on in-person interviews with Dr. Ruth Small, Associate Professor in the School of Information Studies, and Barbara Settel, Associate Dean of the School of Information Studies (Small and Settel developed and administered MLS-ISDP from 1993-96), and an e-mail interview with Amy Merrill, Director of Distance Education, School of Information Studies, since 1996.

In the beginning...

When they established MLS-ISDP, Small and Settel believed that community was "*the* most important thing" they had to consider. Although they planned deliberate efforts to foster community, they were "shocked" at how quickly and spontaneously the new students formed a community. Small reports that within 48 hours of arriving on campus, the first cohort of students had bonded strongly and had developed a distinct group identity. Settel said she had not expected the students' loyalty to one another and the personal friendships which arose.

Cook (1995), writing about "Community and Computer-Generated Distance Learning Environments," comments that "community must be developed from the inside out, and cannot be mandated" (p. 37). In the case of Syracuse's MLS-ISDP, it appears that community does indeed develop from the inside out, exceeding the administrators' initial expectations — as Small put it, "it just happens." Although community cannot be mandated, it can be encouraged, and indeed the MLS-ISDP administrators have continued to encourage it. See the section "Fostering community," a compilation of administrator and student perspectives on factors which facilitate the MLS-ISDP community.

Over time...

Small and Settel initially planned many social activities for the "boot camp" residency, such as a barbecue, an ice-cream social, etc. Over the years, they've reduced the number of events, because students don't seem to need many activities in order to form community. In fact, Small notes that students get annoyed with too many social activities. Although she initially worried that students would not know what to do with themselves outside of class, it is now clear that students fill their time easily, with both coursework and informal socializing.

Residencies

Small felt that the residency component of the program was "critical," particularly for core courses. She said, "if we had a strictly Internet-based program, we would lose so much learning," a sentiment echoed by many of the students interviewed.

Settel agreed that an intensive residency fosters community. She added that it was important the students all begin the program at the same time, with the introductory course (IST 511, Introduction to the Library and Information Profession), on campus for an entire week. In contrast, the on-campus MLS students do not all have to take IST 511 together or even at the same time. In focus group interviews with MLS-ISDP students, Small (1998) found that, ironically, "most distance focus group participants shared the belief that, in a resident learning situation, they would not know their classmates as well as they do in the distance program."

Group identity and rivalry

The groups bond so well and form such distinct identities, that group rivalries arise:

- Small commented that the rivalry was particularly strong between the first and second classes (1993 and 1994); members of those cohorts commented upon that rivalry as well.
- Merrill observed that in a recent "mixed" class of ISDP and on-campus students, "the two groups did not mix well. The ISDP students had bonded much more than any of the on-campus students ever do. The ISDP students in the class took on an air of superiority and even put several of the on-campus students down in person and on the listserv."
- The class of 1998 is so large (62 students) that it is split into two cohorts, A and B. Students chose which cohort to join before arriving on campus and meeting one another. Merrill observed, "the two groups have very distinct personalities and each one thinks it's better than the other one."

Because students from any given cohort inevitably end up interacting with students from other cohorts as they progress through the program, it is worth investigating ways to mitigate the rivalry and to promote a wider sense of community. A few students said that they felt comfortable in both their own cohorts and MLS-ISDP as a whole. This would be an ideal balance to strike, if possible. Examining the phenomenon of group identity and rivalry within other graduate programs, both distance and traditional, would be useful for comparison and further study.

Listservs

Small and Settel set up the listservs in order to foster academic communication among the students. They said they had not anticipated that the listservs would be used socially, as indeed they are.

Merrill wrote that, "It always amazes me when I get messages from students who say 'We've been discussing...'" and added that "rumors and misinformation especially tend to spread like wildfire through these lists." Further research might be done in comparing on-campus and listserv student "rumor mills," and ways to encourage faculty-administrator-student channels of information could be explored.

Students' perspectives

The quotations below were gathered during e-mail interviews with twelve of the students who participated in this project. Quotations are anonymous or attributed depending on each student's preference. Students are identified by the year they began the program.

To begin the interview, I asked each respondent:

As an ISDP student, do you feel that you are part of an ISDP community?
If so, how would you describe that community?
If not, what characteristics of community were lacking?

I sent follow-up questions to each respondent based on the comments and observations in their initial response to me. These quotations highlight the themes and issues that emerged during the interviews. While they represent some consensus, they also illustrate some differences of opinion and experience.

Boot camp and residencies

"While it often seemed like baptism under fire, the process of coming together for 'library boot camp' was an ideal way to make us all feel a part of something bigger than ourselves....We were all in this together. We shared the heat, the late nights, the pressures — together." (Denise Primm, 1994)

"I think it was the intensiveness (probably not a word) and the communal living that clinched the bond. It was a pretty grueling week, and a lot of people had a tough time (myself included). There was a lot of encouragement from everyone else..." (Julie Diana, 1996)

"...the intensive residencies were the great impetus to the strong sense of community I now feel. I've never felt a stronger sense of community than in the last [elective] class, when many of us were seeing each other for the last time in the ISDP student context." (Laurie Kutner, 1996)

Who's in, who's out

"I was in only the second class of ISDP-MLS students, so we were sort of known as 'the second group,' as opposed to 'the first group.' And opposed is a good way to describe it. There was a certain amount of rivalry or something. I never found the folks from the first group to be as friendly (with a few exceptions, of course). They hung out with each other, and my group hung out together." (a 1994 student)

"I feel part of the larger MLS-ISDP community....I had lost track of who actually started with me in boot camp. So many people are on different time schedules to finish the program — it's not like everyone who started last summer is the class of 1999, for instance. I feel connected to people who just started this summer that were in my Summer Institute classes and to others who started the year before I did. I've also said good-bye already to people on the fast track who were in boot camp with me." (a 1997 student)

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